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Physical activity of children aged 3-4

Parents' viewpoint

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<p>The purpose of this final thesis was to implement a case study in order to find out parents' opinions about the amount, quality and significance of play and physical activity of their children aged three and four. This topic rises up from the resent public discussion and studies of the situation of the health of children in Finland.</p> <p>This final thesis was conducted by using a survey method. Data was collected by sending out the questionnaires to the parents of certain children group in Salmisaari Sport Kindergarten. The sample was selected to be parents of 20 children.</p> <p>The results showed parents' positive attitudes towards play and physical activity. They understand the value of physical activities and play. Almost all agreed on the different aspects of quality and what it means but in the amount and ideal amounts of play and sports there are big differences.</p> <p>The results of this thesis indicate that the situation does not seem to be as bad as public discussion gives grounds to understand. Most children are playing and having physical exercise enough according to their parents. Parents think that the play and physical activity is significant part of the development of the child and diverse activities are the most effective. In these cases the physical activity and play were described to be for example social and advanced.</p>	
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<p>Tämän lopputyön tarkoituksena oli selvittää 3-4-vuotiaiden lasten vanhempien mielipiteitä liikunnan ja leikin määrästä, laadusta sekä merkityksekkyydestä. Aihe nousee ajankohtaisesta julkisesta keskustelusta sekä lasten terveyden tilaa koskevista tutkimuksista Suomessa.</p> <p>Lopputyö toteutettiin kyselytutkimuksena. Aineisto kerättiin jakamalla kyselyitä kahdenkymmenen lapsen vanhemmille Salmisaaren liikuntapäiväkodissa.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittavat vanhempien positiivisia asenteita leikkiä ja fyysistä aktiivisuutta kohtaan. He ymmärtävät näiden merkityksen. Lähes kaikki ovat samaa mieltä laadusta, mutta ideaalisista liikunnan ja leikin määristä on mielipiteissä eroavaisuuksia.</p> <p>Lopputyön tulokset antavat ymmärtää, että tilanne ei ole niin paha kuin julkisesta keskustelusta voisi ymmärtää. Vanhempien mukaan suurin osa lapsista liikkuu ja leikkii tarpeeksi. Vanhemmat arvioivat leikin ja fyysisen aktiivisuuden merkitykselliseksi osaksi lapsen kehitystä. He kuvailevat leikin ja fyysisen aktiivisuuden olevan parhaimmillaan, kun ne ovat monipuolisia. Kyseisissä tapauksissa leikki ja fyysinen aktiivisuus kuvailtiin esimerkiksi sosiaaliseksi ja kehittäväksi.</p>	
Avainsanat	leikki, fyysinen aktiivisuus, psykomotoriikka,

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## **1. Introduction**

Finnish national institute for health and welfare estimates that in 2011 about one third of the children were not having enough physical activities (National institution for health and welfare 2011). This has caused concern in public discussion. Kindergartens have important role in promoting the lifelong practices of physical activity. Therefore it is important for the kindergartens to have the support and cooperation of parents in this task.

The aim of this final thesis is to conduct a case study by collecting opinions of the parents of the children of ages three and four about physical activity of their children; about the amount, quality and significance of it. The purpose is to find out how parents understand the amount and quality of physical activities, and if they see the importance of it.

This topic came up in a conversation with my cooperation partner and is recent due to many public discussions about the health situation of the children. Amount, quality and importance are under examination since parents' understanding of all of them together is the precondition for physical activities and play in families. This age group is chosen because in the cooperation kindergarten it is the one whose activities need the improvement the most according to cooperation partner. Parents of this age group were also in the interests of the kindergarten.

The main theoretical backgrounds are psychomotor activity, play and physical exercise. The view to physical activity comes from German theorist Zimmer (2002, 2010), who is a pioneer in psychomotor theories. The concept physical activity includes both the physical exercise and the play. The concept of play comes from Sayreen's and Guerin's (2000) perspectives on play. I will also include some recent studies about the subject and recommendations from the authorities.

This final project was executed in cooperation with Salmisaari sport kindergarten. It is a kindergarten with the special emphasis on physical activities and using them in all early childhood education. This study is partly continuation for the study they have

conducted before. It was about the opinions of the parents of the children taking part in their after school activities. The data was collected from there and the final version of this paper will be distributed there in order for them to be able to develop their work and practices according to the results. The kindergarten was, based on this study about to rethink the quality and amount of physical activities and promote the kindergarten based on parents' thoughts.

Unfortunately at the moment of publishing this final thesis, the kindergarten is closed. This is really bad thing but it happened really quickly and with short notice and obviously I could not influence it not to happen. The company itself is running and this final thesis can be delivered to them if it is their will.

The survey was conducted to the parents of one group. Parents are the target group and their opinions are to be observed because they know their children best. Parents are customers to the kindergarten services as well as children, but they are often forgotten.

This final project is a questionnaire, including ready scaled opinion questions and open-ended evaluative questions. In analyzing the results I categorized terms and words used, did some numerical organizing and underlined the answers which were most useful for the purpose of this study. In the end I discussed the results and the research process. There are some further research suggestions in the end of the final thesis as well.

## **2. Physical activity of children aged 3-4**

In this final thesis physical activity refers to physical exercise, play or psychomotor activities or combination of two or three of them. These concepts will be defined more in details in this chapter.

### **2.1 Recommendations for physical activity**

According to Doherty and Bailey (2003: 102) children should exercise at least three times a week for 20-30 minutes at the time, so actively that it makes their heart beat 140 per minute or more. This sounds quite little of exercise. According to the Finnish

early childhood education plan the recommendations are non-committal and no exact heart rates or minutes are mentioned. It is only argued that the child needs a minimum of two hours of brisk physical activity in a day. There are recommendations for psychomotor activities to last about an hour, depending on the group, but in all the cases it should be regular (Zimmer 2010: 134).

Social and Health Ministry has done The Recommendations for physical activity in early childhood education in cooperation with Nuori Suomi in 2005, or at least in early childhood education plan (Guidebook from ministry of social affairs and health 2005: 17). It is part of National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education. This recommendation for early childhood physical education gives advice about the quality, amount, environment, tools, planning and implementing and cooperation partners. The psychomotor theory also emphasizes the importance of different tools and suitable environments (Zimmer 2010: 130-132). Suitable environment is not always big gym hall but can be a small classroom or a playground outside.

Decision should be made at three levels. At political level there should be more encouragement for healthier lifestyle and lot of opportunities for children and families should be created. Secondly, people who are daily with the children should motivate and show good example to the individual child. And at civil-level there should be more encouragement for a positive atmosphere towards physical activeness.

## 2.2 Recent studies and current situation in Finland

The recent studies and discussions about the lack of physical exercise of the children and of the whole nation of Finland have caused concerns about the health of the people. According to estimates about one third of the children do not have enough physical activities (National institute for health and welfare 2011). The study of National public health institute from year 2007 gave the same conclusion. Approximately one third or even a bit more is not having physical exercise enough in age groups of 30-54, 55-74 and 75+ (National public health institute 2007). Assumption is that the children follow about the same amounts as their parents, because children embrace the attitudes of the parents (Zimmer 2002: 88).



In Finland psychosocial health problems among the children are increasing and the childhood factors cannot be overlooked when discussing about the future of the mental illnesses and social coping skills. (Rajantie and Perheentupa 2006: 113). According to Rajantie and Perheentupa (2006: 114) the child care clinics must be improved but also the early childhood education could take greater responsibility on educating children to have healthier lifestyle not forgetting the parents' responsibility either.

About ten per cent of children at age three to five have less physical exercise than the recommended minimum two hours per day and in this ten per cent there are a little bit more girls than boys. There is almost no correlation between the educational level of the parents and the exercise amount of the child but a small correlation between the exercise amount of the parents and the children. In the families where parents have physical activities at least two or three times a week, 91% of their children play outdoor games and have other physical activities at least two hours a day. In families where parents do fewer than two or three times sports a week, 89% of children still have physical activities recommended two hours a day. (Mäki 2012: 128,129).

Most Finnish studies about physical activity concentrate on the amount of exercise but not on the quality, meaning diversity and directness of it. According to Sayeed and Guerin (2000) not only amount but also quality should be taken into account, as it is in the recommendations.

### 2.3 Physical exercise

In this thesis physical exercise does not refer to training of professional athletics but more to daily movement and activities and sports as a support measure for life management as well as encouragement to develop physics and personality (Zimmer 2002: 117). Naturally, physical exercises are part of healthy life and future, when talking about the children. Physical exercises can promote energy, increase fitness, combat various illnesses, increase psychological well-being and self-esteem, contribute to moral and social development and decrease overweight, obesity and chronic disease risk (Doherty and Bailey 2003: 97-99). This list makes it already important to be interested in children's physical activity.

The benefits of physical exercise are such as psychological well-being, self-esteem, moral and social development, decrease the risk of overweight and obesity, chronic disease risk factors and physical activity tracking (Doherty and Bailey 2003: 97,98). Physical exercise and health have clear connections (Internet document, Fogelholm, M. in Terveys 2000-tutkimus, 2007: 44).

Zimmer lists the functions of the physical exercise to be subjective, social, productive, expressional, explorative, impressive, comparative and adaptive. Subjective function means that a child learns his/her own body because s/he has to meet with him- /her self. Social function is about playing and exercising with other kids and learning to agree to give in and make compromises. In physical exercise the child produces performances with his/her own body. This is a productive function. Expressive function means that through movements the child expresses and lives out the emotions and real life situations. Impressive function means that the child feels a range of emotions while being physically active. Explorative function happens when child learns to know the material and tridimensional environment and is adapting to the environment but at the same time adapting the environment to him/her self. Comparative function is about comparing oneself to others and through that deal with winning and losing. Adaptive function is ability to stand exertion and reach for physical boundaries and lift the performance level. (Zimmer 2002: 15).

The physical exercise that children need must be diverse. Only doing certain sports is not enough because the different outcomes come after different exercises (Doherty and Bailey 2003: 111). Having only outside games or inside exercise is not enough but children need both environments to enjoy physical activities at (Doherty and Bailey 2003: 112). This is also why in the questionnaire there were questions from the parents about the diversity of the activities and whether their child prefers outdoor or indoor activities.

The physical exercise has benefits not only for health factors but also for the developmental factors. The development of self is strongly based on physical experiences in the childhood. And these experiences are also the base for the identity of the child. Through them the child can gain the feelings of mastery and success. Also through physical exercise the child also develops the experience of causation of his/her own

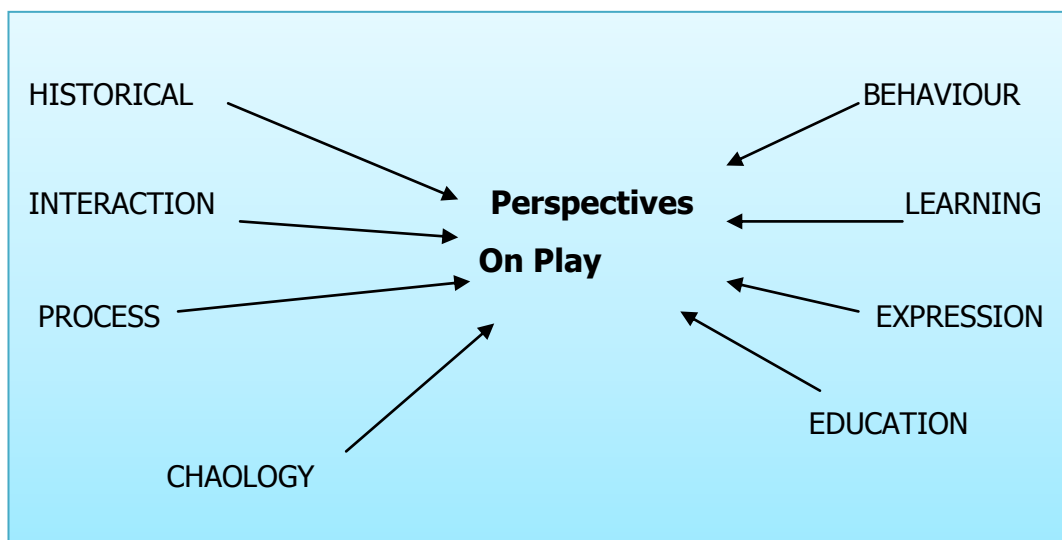
activity. Something happened because I made it happen. When the concept of self is developing the child's view of other's perception of him/her develops and self-evaluation skills increase. (Zimmer 2002: 20-25).

It is important that children meet and play with other children. Nowadays many children live in small families where there are not so many siblings to play with. Age's three to six are important in developing social behavior models. And especially between the ages of three to four the ability to sympathize can develop and the ability to anticipate reactions of others grows. (Zimmer 2002: 26-29).

Physical exercises enable the cognitive development as well. The child explores the world by senses and movements and not by thinking and imaging (Zimmer 2002: 33). Through different materials, tools and resources child constructs the cognitive facts.

## 2.4 Play

There are several theories to play. I have chosen to use Sayeed's and Guerin's (2000) perspectives on play since it is broad and looks play from various angles. They look play from many perspectives. Their theory is combination of various previous theories (Sayeed and Guerin 2000: 9).



**Figure 1. Perspectives on play (Sayeed and Guerin 2000)**

The first theories of play were developed around the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Before that the play and childhood were considered as immature adulthood and as stages of evolution. The general thinking of play has then in the twentieth century changed to understand the developmental aspects of play. (Sayeed and Guerin 2000: 10).

Piaget's theory of child development (1969, 2000) fits this theory well on the parts of the perspectives of behavior and learning. At the age of three to four, children are at the stage of so called symbolic play (Sayeed and Guerin 2000: 11, Piaget 2000: 57, 58) which means that the child transforms the reality to the needs of self and includes external models to the play. The language is forming and vocabulary increases which enables symbols to increase as well (Piaget 1969: 58).

If play is a child's way to learn it means that the play has educational meaning as well. Already in 1906 Friedrich Froebel understood that and was the pioneer for the kindergarten and nursery movement. In the long run this has led even to the fact that kindergartens and child care are called early childhood education and play is recognized as very significant there. (Sayeed and Guerin 2000: 12,13).

Play gives a child ways to express emotions and thoughts, especially if s/he feels the environment safe (Sayeed and Guerin 2000: 12, Vakkuri 1999: 8). Sayeed and Guerin briefly mention the perspective of chaology to play. This means that there are no clear boundaries between the process and the product. It can be described as undirected, free flow –play. This underlines the importance of unstructured or undirected play. It can also be called as "free flow play" as Tina Bruce has called it (Internet document, Bruce 1993).

Sayeed and Guerin discuss the play as a process (2000: 15). This idea can be overlapping and at the same time contradictory to the idea of chaology. Sayeed and Guerin tell that Janet Moyles has explored this idea of process of chaology more. She describes the functions of free play and directed play as free play being explorative and direct play as one which develops mastery. These can happen simultaneously. The outcome of the play process is dependent on the individual player and on contextual factors which an adult can usually have an effect on.

Interaction is one of the perspectives on play. It is heavily involved in a kindergarten environment as almost everything usually happens in groups. There is interaction at two levels, between peers and between the child and an adult in play. Sayeed and Guerlin use Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development theory here. Actual development level can rise to potential development level with the help of an adult or other more advanced person. This is contradictory to the Bandura's theory of the child's innate cognitive ability to learn in social situation which Sayeed and Guerlin introduce as well. (Sayeed and Guerlin 2000: 13, 14). This perspective can mean in practice for example imagination plays, playing 'home' or role plays. Daniels (2001: 36) introduces also the interaction between the social and individual. This could be adapted to the theory of play as well where the child is in an interaction with the larger social context.

Sayeed's and Guerlin's theory does not mention anything about communication perspective on play. As Rödström (1990) says the symbols and learning of language increases the possibilities to different plays increase and more potential of play is released (1990: 67,68). Play enables communication and through that the cognitive, physical and social development (Sayeed and Guerin 2000: 11) and learning of all of them as well.

## 2.5 Psychomotor activity

Part of the physical activity in early years is psychomotor development which means wholeness of psychic and motoric activities and integration of mind and psyche. Sensory integration is vital part of it and it is about combining different senses in physical education situations in order to learn and develop holistically. Psychomotor orientation sees physical activity as a way of expressing oneself when cognitive, motivational, emotional and physical elements are included. (Zimmer 2010: 19).

One of the main aims of psychomotor activities is that the self-image and worth of the child could increase (Zimmer 2010:45-47) and through psychomotor activities all the children should get the feeling of mastering their own physical abilities and being confident with them (Doherty and Bailey 2003:111). Zimmer (2010: 47) defines the con-

cept of self, consisting of image of self (characteristics which can be described) and self-worth (estimation and complacency of own abilities). This supports the idea of using sports as a supportive measure in early childhood education.

Psychomotor activities combine the play and physical activities. There are preconditions for children to make the play meaningful in psychomotor sense. These preconditions are the import of play, changes in effect- and power relation, freedom of options and contradictions. It must also be voluntarily based. It means that no one is forced to do anything but activities are formed so that they are so attractive that everyone is willing to join. (Zimmer 2010: 77-80). In psychomotor activity the play is strengthened with physical movements and expressions which give space for children to create alternative behavior models for reality. Meaningfulness to the play comes through changes in roles during the play (Zimmer 2010: 77).

What Zimmer says about the effect and power roles sounds as if the play were not reality, even though I believe that at the moment of play the child is in reality and things in the play are real to the child. She says that (2010: 77, 78) the child can deal the roles and power relations and learn new behavioral models without it leading to a disaster. This is safe in a playful environment. This is an effort to give child a feeling that s/he can have an effect and that it is his/her own thing that s/he has decided to do (Zimmer 2010: 79). This nice principle does not come always true and it is not always wise to let the children decide upon the activities.

The principle of contradictions is good in motivating the children to take actively part to the activity since it makes the tasks challenging enough but not too hard to complete (Zimmer 2010: 79, 80). A contradiction means an open situation where there is some excitement whether the task can be completed.

## 2.6 Requirements and benefits of physical activities

Certain requirements must be met for the physical activities to be effective in kindergartens and elsewhere. At best physical activities can bring out many benefits from promoting health and holistic development to cognitive learning outcomes. These ben-

efits will come up if the amount, quality and significance are properly recognized. The amount means hours of play and physical activities in daily life. The quality includes the diversity, variable environments, directness and indirectness and the company. The parents and educators must together recognize the significance of physical activities, play and psychomotor activities.

### **3 The research setting**

The final project was executed in cooperation with Salmisaari sport kindergarten. This kindergarten is part of the organization called Liikkuva ja Leikkivä lapsi ry (= Exercising and playing child). They have made a survey before about the same subject to the parents of the children taking part in their after-school activities. This final project was partly a continuation for that survey. I had partly same questions as in previous research done for the organization and partly different according to the objects of this particular study. This is not a comparative study to the one implemented before but these aspects were taken into account when planning on this final thesis study.

Salmisaari sport kindergarten has maximum 50 children but at the moment of this study there were 45 children. Its' values are in physical activity and family-like care. They have flexible rhythms and week schedules are planned only a week before. Of course bigger themes are planned well in advance. During this case study they had a theme for the ongoing months such as ball-games. The physical environment is bright and spacious. They are able to use the services of Salmisaari sport center and all the playgrounds of Helsinki city. They do not have own playground and that is why they often visit different playgrounds and not just one. This practice had thought children to walk long distances and have sports in that form as well.

At the time of answering to the survey the parents did not know that the kindergarten was under the danger of bankrupt so it did not influence the responses. If they would have known maybe more parents would have answered and maybe even exaggerated the positive sides.

### 3.1 The research question

The aim of this study was to collect opinions of the parents of the children age's three to four about the physical activity of their children; about the amount, quality and significance of physical activity. There were also additional questions about the amount and quality of physical activities in dream situation but they were mostly for comparison with the current situation. Physical activities consist of play and physical exercise. (See appendix 1.).

I also wanted to investigate the attitudes which can be concluded from the answers, at least discussed and assumed based on answers even though there were no clear questions about that.

### 3.2 The method

The data was gathered by giving out questionnaires. Fifteen questionnaires were distributed to the parents of the children aged three to four. The reason to collect data by a questionnaire was to get wider sample than by just interviewing a few. This method is so called survey and it includes features and elements from both the qualitative and the quantitative research. This method enables to limit the amount of the data and directly ask about the things that are needed to know. So it enabled to get only the essential information (Alasuutari 2007: 51-52). Bell (2005: 14) notes that in a survey the same questions are asked from the people in same circumstances and this is why the decision to collect data from the parents of the children in one and same children group was made. This is one of the features that make sure that the questions mean the same things to all respondents.

#### 3.2.1 The questionnaire

The questionnaire included factual questions, matrix questions and open-ended questions. Factual questions are those that give objective facts about respondent (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1996: 251-259) and they were used to get the background information of the respondent and his/her child. Most of the questions in the questionnaire were in a form of matrix questions with categories numbered 1-5. Matrix ques-



tions mean that the questions had ready-made response categories (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1996: 258). In the end of the questionnaire there were a few open-ended questions where the respondents had a chance to answer freely. These questions were chosen to be there, even though the answers of those are harder to analyze but they give the respondent the possibility to express themselves more.

The questionnaires were distributed individually to all the parents. The papers were inside the envelope which was asked to return to the box, placed near the entry of the kindergarten. The respondents' were asked to close the envelopes before returning them, in order to keep the answers safe and private. There was a due date in the cover letter but also the responses which came the next day were accepted. All the respondents took the questionnaires home and filled them there. This gave them possibility to answer to it in peace and not have someone looking over all the time. The possibility to fill the questionnaire right away was offered but none of the respondents wanted to do it that way. If they would have been asked to fill it in, in my presence, it would have maybe affected their responses since I would then know which paper came from whom, but it would have guaranteed more answers returned. The research environment was positive towards physical activity from the beginning since it is sport kindergarten. This may have had an effect on the results and this is one reason why the answers cannot be generalized.

The questionnaire was made quite short in order to get more answers back and to lower the threshold to answer but in the end it seemed that it did not have an effect on the number of the papers I got back. From the feedback from the parents I understood that those who returned the papers would have answered even if it was longer questionnaire.

The questions were formed based on earlier chosen theories of play, physical exercise and physical activity. The amount and variety of play at home and at the kindergarten were asked because according to Doherty and Bailey (2003: 111) the physical activities of a child must be versatile. The amount is important from the health point of view and for the development. The parents were asked about the play situations whether they are organized by an adult or is it mostly free play that their child play. This question came up from Sayeed's and Guerin's theory of play. One of their perspectives, called

chaology of play, underlines the importance of unstructured and undirected play (Sayeed and Guerin 2000: 12). The question about the playing company of the child was helpful in reaching the aim of the research, since there is a clear difference whether the child plays only with an adult or with other children. Different social development happens when playing with an adult and other child. Parents give the child the role model and siblings or other peers give the model on how to act (Zimmer 2002: 88).

Zimmer (2010) points out the importance of positive emotions in physical activities and this is why the questions about how the child experiences the physical activities were asked. Answers to this question gave important information about the attitudes of children towards physical activity which later leads to life-style choices.

There were questions to describe the play and physical activities of the child, to evaluate the importance of play and physical education and about the playing environment. These were there to support the conclusions and get wider perspective on the answers. In the end it seemed that there was couple of questions which were not important for the purposes of this study but maybe also those questions aroused parents to think about the issue from different perspectives.

### 3.3 Data analysis

In the questionnaire the questions were under five main themes or headings. The data was also analyzed based on these themes. First couple of questions was about the child's background information and the background information of the respondent. These two categories do not need to be analyzed the same way the rest. The rest of the themes were the physical education and exercise of the child and the play of the child. These two categories were mostly made with matrix questions. The last themes were open-ended questions of the significance of the play and physical education, the picture of the dream- kind of situation and other further comments. As the play and physical exercise were combined to be physical activity in the research question they are presented in analysis section as one.

The number of filled questionnaires I got back from the parents was eight. Analyzing the data started by making a table / chart where all the answers were placed together and the answers of ready-scaled questions were counted and marked. There was no point to start to count averages or central tendencies since the sample was so small. Having numbers in categories and in scales in answer possibilities they had to be analyzed as well. No analysis programmes were used but only eyeballing, which means same as browsing (Thomas, 2009: 212), and creation a table of the answers and amounts of each answer.

The answers of open-ended question were summarized and highlights were added to the thoughts that were especially beneficial for the purposes of this study, to make returning to them easier. Also highlights were made to the exact words that were referable to the theories.

In analyzing open ended answers, the attempts to understand what the respondents meant by certain words and language were there. The inner meanings of words were tried to find. Most of the answers were quite short and separate word-lists or sentences so there were not the usage of some words continuously or in different contexts.

After this data analysis the second analysis was made, according to the most important factors that rose from my theory, the amount, the quality and the significance of the physical exercise and play. This data analysis stayed simpler, on a more broad level and did not look in to the details so much.

The fact that only a portion of the questionnaires were returned back, eight in numbers, influenced data analysis. No generalizations could be made and the point of saturation was not reached in all of the questions. In some questions quite the same answers started to appear but for some, all the respondents answered differently.

### **3 Results and conclusions**

All the respondents were mothers. Half of the children under observation were boys and half of them were girls. Boys and girls were not separated in analysis but all were analyzed together. At this stage of development, when they are three or four there is no point for separation because they both need the same quality and amount of physical activities.

In the results and conclusions the amount, quality and significance are separated and discussed differently, because they are the most important factors that rise from the theory of physical activity.

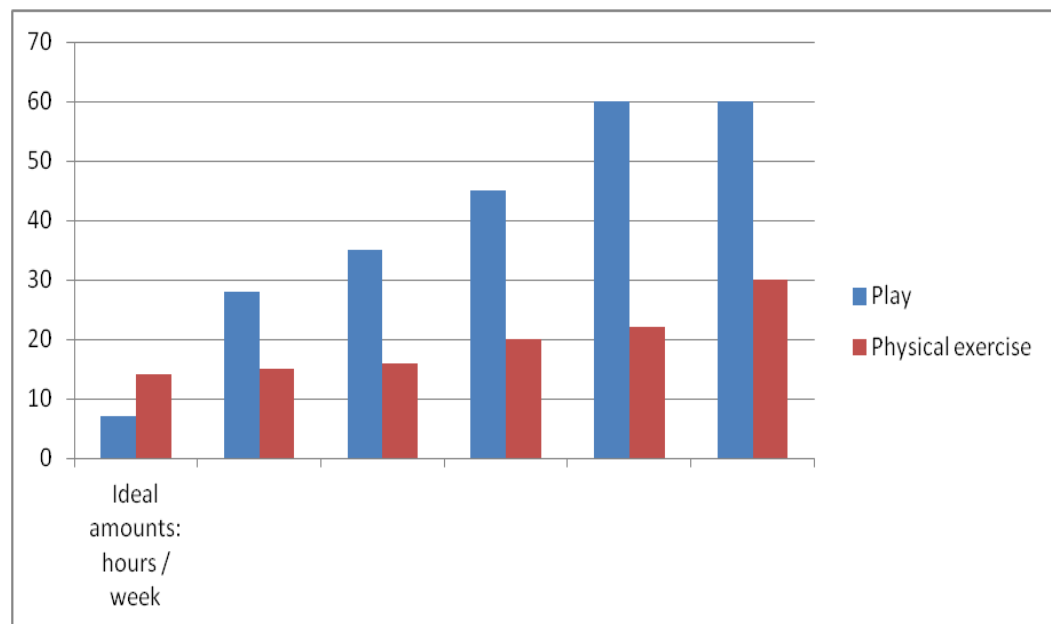
#### **3.1 The Amount**

There were really big differences in the answers to the questions of ideal amounts of physical activities. How much parents would like their children to exercise from 14 to 30 hours a week. And to play the amounts were from 7 to 60 hours a week. This shows me that the knowledge of recommendations might be weak but at least there are none of the respondents who would like their children to have physical activities less than the recommended two hours per day. To play there are no recommendations about the amount and quality since it is something that children create themselves and can do it anywhere and anyhow. There was one respondent who said that she would like her child to play seven hours per week in an ideal situation, aroused me to think that the respondent have not thought about the question very well probably. Based on my knowledge about the kindergarten I know that every child plays seven hours per week and even more already right now, and I doubt that the mother would like to decrease her child's play. On the other hand the answer of 60 hours play a week sounds exaggerated because that would be over one third of the hours of the whole week and if nights added then there would be very little time for anything else.

For the question of what the play and physical exercise would look like in an ideal situation parents did not have too much to say. Three of the respondents said that current situation is already ideal and some mentioned that more time with parents would be ideal but almost nothing at all about the other aspects of quality or the amount. From

this the assumption is that the parents think that otherwise the dream situation is now, just their own time management needs improvements. This is good notion from the parents and it shows that they understand the importance of time spent with the children. The common plays and physical activities of children and parents have positive effect on child's psychomotor development (Zimmer 2002: 89). Seems like this questionnaire aroused them to think about this and it is hoped that they will make changes to the wanted direction. Only two of the respondents did not know how much they would say that their child would play in an ideal situation. That shows that most of the parents think the amount of physical activities and if there is enough of it or not.

**Table 1. Ideal amounts (hrs/week) of play and physical exercise according to parents**



In this table only six results are shown because two of the respondents did not answer numerically to the question but wrote that ideal amount is as much as the child likes to exercise or play.

### 3.2 The Quality

According to the results it seems that parents' know the importance of play and sports and they appreciate if the activities are variable and through that quality is higher. Also parents seem to understand the meaning of enough physical activities this comes up in answers where they describe play and sports as a tool for social development and de-

velopment of ability of a child to set aims and increases child's self-worth. Parts of Finnish early childhood education plan recommendations can be found from the results. There were notions about the environment, quality and amount in the answers which are mentioned in the recommendations as well.

Two of the respondents did not describe nor evaluate the meaningfulness of the play and sport situations at all. But all of the respondents thought that the physical activities are versatile in the kindergarten and at home, at least at some level. This shows that parents also pay attention to what kind of activities they organize for their children. No one said that the physical exercises and play situations are always the same which would mean lower quality. One aspect of quality is various playgrounds and according to the respondents the children enjoy both the outdoor and indoor playing areas which mean that they do let their children to have physical activities in different places. Three of eight respondents did not separate their children's preferences but answered that their child likes both indoor and outdoor activities. This is almost half of the respondents.

### 3.3 The Significance

In describing the significance of child's physical activity and play the answers sounded quite professional and fancy because they included knowledge about the developmental aspects of sports and play. There were indications to the physical, social, psychological and daily skills development, through play and physical activities. This showed that parents know the importance and acknowledge the significance of play and physical activities. One respondent wrote that she had no energy to start writing down her evaluation of meaningfulness of sports and play but two others who did not answer that question left the question empty. This made me think that whether they did not have energy or time either or then they did merely not want to answer if they feel that they do not know what to say or how significant the play and sports really is. The general attitude towards play and physical activity seemed to be positive and encouraging.

### 3.4 Physical activity

Most parents answered that their child considers physical activity as reasonable or interesting. This might be due to the given options even though there was a possibility to come up with one's own adjective. Zimmer sees this as one of the condition to the physical activity (2010: 136).

The results show that in parents' or better said mothers' opinions children have more physical exercise at the kindergarten than at home. Most of them said that the child has physical exercise in the kindergarten a lot and at home most of them said that the amount is between average and lot. Mostly the physical exercises are various and diverse in kindergarten but at home between average and diverse. Over half of the respondents said that their child prefers outside activities. Mothers described the physical exercise of their child such as "spontaneous", "free", "happy", "effortless", "eventful", "rhythmic", "energetic", "improving development", "sweaty", "playful" and "advanced". These terms could be divided into two main categories; Functional adjectives and expressional adjectives (Zimmer, 2002). Functional adjectives mean the adjectives which describe more the activity level of physical activity. Expressional adjectives describe more the outcome and feelings of physical activity, and the way it seems for the observer of the activity.

Functional adjectives:	Expressional adjectives:
spontaneous	free
effortless	happy
energetic	eventful
improving development	rhythmic
advanced	sweaty
	playful

**Figure 2. Adjectives on physical exercise**

This tells that children mostly enjoy the physical exercise and it is not something they have to do but they are willing to do. Even the answer that the exercise is sweaty is good because it tells that the child is getting into a better shape or that his/her metabolism is working. The adjective playful supports the theory of psychomotor theory

where play and physical exercise meet because when a child's physical exercise is playful it means that s/he enjoys it and it is one criterion for psychomotor activities (Zimmer, 2010).

Only one mother wrote that the benefit of sports is that it keeps the child away from television. This was surprising, since I would have thought that more respondents would have said something about the preventative influence of physical activities, especially preventing from excess usage of media. As one of the eight mentioned television, it fits the statistics almost perfectly. In ages three to five only small portion, about 5 % watches television more than two hours a day (Mäki 2012: 131). So here 12,5% respondents mentioned it which can mean that in this family there is a risk of watching too much television. This is just my own argument. Little bit more girls watch television more than two hours, this respondent was a mother for a girl which makes the case even more "suitable" for general statistics.

Half of the respondents' opinion is that the child plays a lot in the kindergarten and half think that the amount is between a lot and average. At home most children play between the average and lot. According to the answers, at home the play is more free play than at the kindergarten but at both it happens to some extent. The play is more often directed at kindergarten than at home. All of the respondents say that their child sees play as meaningful and reasonable activity. Only two respondents said that their child plays with an adult only at home, three of them said that with other children and three answered both, with adult and other children. Mothers described the play of their child with words such as "educational", "didactic", "voluntary", "humoristic", "safe", "socially flexible", "enthusiastic", "fussy", "imaginative", "physically diverse" and "meaningful to listen to and to watch". These adjectives could be divided into two main categories: functional (Zimmer, 2002) terms and "outcome" terms. So called functional terms refer to words that describe the developmental aspects of play and outcome terms are more notional and describe the feeling or the outcome of the play.



Functional terms:	Outcome terms:
educational	humoristic
didactic	fussy
socially flexible	enthusiastic
physically diverse	imaginative
voluntary	safe

**Figure 3. Adjectives on play**

Almost all the Sayreen's and Guerin's perspectives on play (2000: 9) come up in the answers. There are notions about learning skills, practicing group dynamics and social skills, chaology which means undirected play situations, expressing oneself and learning to be more secure about oneself, healthy behaviour and about how the process of game is more important than winning. Only historical perspective on play is not mentioned in the answers. This confirms that Sayreen's and Guerin's theory is quite competent and broad.

Functions of Zimmer's list of functions of physical activity (see p.5) can be found in the results. In the answers of parents the social, productive and expressional functions are clearly visible. For example the adjective socially flexible can be referred to the social function of physical activity since it was about learning to agree and make compromises (Zimmer, 2002). Also it can be partly in contact with adaptive function of physical education because lifting performance level can also be lifting social performance level.

From all of these results it can be concluded that parents think that the play and physical activities are really important. Their thoughts of amount of sufficient physical activities vary but they have reasonable ideas on that and the quality is something they pay attention to.

There was one additional question there for the benefit of the kindergarten I made this for. It was the question whether child's interest on physical activities have changed during the time in kindergarten. The answers showed that the interest towards sports of five of the children of respondents have increased and of three stayed the same during the time in Salmisaari sport kindergarten. This is good feedback for the kinder-

garten. More than half say that their child enjoys now the sport situations more or at least is more interested than before going to this day-care unit.

According to results the conclusion could be made that Salmisaari sport kindergarten could improve the diversity of the physical activities and amount of play in their daily practices. Since they did not get the perfect and the best scores in all answers, there is room for improvement. They could organize physical activities to be more versatile. The amount of physical activities was seen enough in the kindergarten. Because the interest of most children has increase during the time in the kindergarten, the kindergarten has been successful in creating the physical education attractive. This is an important aspect of sports according to psychomotor theory (Zimmer 2002: 78, 79).

Parents' viewpoints and opinions indicate that children in these particular families do have healthy lifestyles and are not in danger of unhealthy future. This directs to the theory supported conclusion that multiple and attractive physical exercise where children can have different senses in use are creating positive mindsets about physical activity. Physical activity can be seen in a more board way than just physical exercise and it seems that in this case study the respondents had understood it and used that knowledge in their everyday life with their children. This leads to the conclusion that parents' have quite clear understanding of the risks of not having physical activity. How they support their child to play and be physically active is everyone's own choice.

Most of the results support the theory and knowledge of play and sports but are contradictory to the recent studies which state that the children do not have enough physical activities. This might be because this final thesis is implemented at sport kindergarten so at least in the kindergarten the children do have exercise. Maybe at the normal kindergarten, without any special emphasis, the parents would think differently.

Some of the results of this study could be compared to the results of the study done before for the same company. I did not have an opportunity to read the earlier study at the point where I analyzed my own results and I do not remember everything from it. I was not able to do the comparison but I hope that the company itself will do it.

## **4 Ethical questions, critics and limitations**

### **4.1 Ethics**

To ensure the research permission I was in contact with the head of the kindergarten who gave me the research permission / contract. Since the kindergarten is private, it was easy and quick to get the permission. Also as I was surveying adults I did not need to ask anyone's permission whereas if I had interviewed kids I should have asked the permission from the parents, which is quite difficult sometimes. Confidentiality and anonymity are parts of the ethical guidelines for doing research on social field (Bell 2005: 48). I followed these guidelines by letting the respondents to know that the answers will be totally anonymous and confidential, so only I would read the papers. No one can be identified from the final project by the results and answers, even if the reader knew some parents of the kids in that exact kindergarten. Also I let them understand that this is totally voluntary to answer the survey. Every parent was assumed to participate by giving the questionnaire to everyone so I underlined the voluntary participation. This way of proceeding is called implied consent (Thomas 2009: 150).

One of the parents, while returning the paper commented something on one question and in one survey paper there were exactly the same words and answer, so I right on assumed that this is from that parent and this caused a small shake on the anonymity of the answers. Of course I can not be sure but the thought crossed my mind. I did not let this have an effect on conclusions. Also because I worked in that kindergarten by some answers I can guess whom we are talking about but these are just unreliable guesses so I do not think it has affected the ethical point of view.

When the question is about someone's own child it has to be critically, ethically thought what is proper to ask and the questions must be formed so that no parents is offended. Of course the researcher cannot know everything that might be sensitive to the parents and this leads me as a researcher to the sensitive place. I took this into consideration by before distributing the questionnaires giving one sample paper to my brother who is a father of children in this examined age group.

## 4.2 Critics

Critic to this research method, a survey, is that it does not give voice to the respondent to speak much about anything outside the topic and it restricts their say even about the topic. In this final project only one respondent wrote down something to the area which was left for the further comments and told about her child's play and daily situations. Survey method is quite shallow and from the written text the researcher cannot read the tones and moods of the writer.

If this study was made by interviews this could be more profound and deep. The interview is a good way to collect material for the case studies and since the sample was small here it would have been possible to get through interviews as well. I give some critics to my personal time management, as it would have been better to analyze the results and draw conclusions right when I got the questionnaires back. Since this is only a small-scale study it could have been finished earlier also to get it given to the kindergarten before its closing date.

## 4.3 Limitations

Limitations to the survey method are that as doing it anonymously, I as a researcher cannot know who has returned the answers and so there is no follow-up to get all the answers back (Bell 2005: 140,150). This happened to me as well and from fifteen distributed forms I got back only eight. Small sample also prohibits the generalization of the results and the conclusions.

Another limitation to this research was that there was only one researcher so there was no possibility to check and ensure the validity or the reliability of all data and sources. To share and discuss the process during the process is good for the validity of the research, because it ensures that the researcher does not only take ideas from the sources that prove her right. This was averted by presenting contradictory theories and statistics.

## 5 Discussion

This is a case study, so its reliability is valid only in this kindergarten for these children and parents who were involved. This small sample does not give grounds for generalizations. The crucial question on reliability is whether two similar researches would conclude the same results (Bell 2005: 117). Conclusions of this study can be used somewhere for example in the other kindergarten of the same company since this particular kindergarten is closed.

The questions in the survey were neutral so that they do not lead the respondent in any direction. Since the kindergarten is having special emphasis on the sport and physical activities it might be that the parents already have special values on physical activities when putting their children there. So it would mean that this research is aimed to research opinions of the parents of the children in sport kindergarten. The sample is already a clear group of people with probably the same interest. This does not affect the reliability if it is clear that this group of people is researched and not random parents of all the kids at the age of three to four.

Some of my questions about the amount and quality of sports at home were risky because it can be assumed that of course parents want to give positive picture of their home circumstances and not necessarily answer honestly, especially when it is a question about their children's wellbeing. Sometimes parents have tendency to see their children in brighter light than they really are, and not admit their weaknesses.

Does this research really answer the research question is the idea behind the validity (Bell 2005: 117). My research problem was to research to opinions of the parents of the sport kindergarten children about the quality and the amount of the play and physical activities. The research problem was solved by forming many questions out of it. The answers to these questions did answer my research questions.

The answering scopes and scales must be well thought and suitable for the purposes of the study for the respondent to be able to answer to the question the best possible way. In the next study I know what to do differently. The interview might be more effective way to get more data even though it would be then even smaller sample.

The theme interview could have worked here as well. To study this theme is important and it is also important to get results studied with different methods to make them more reliable.

According to this final project and to my understanding of the situation, physical activity level is not as bad in these families and in this Salmisaari sport kindergarten as public discussion about matter lets us understand. Of course because this is only small scale case study I can not say that public discussion is all groundless and some parts of this thesis fit the statistics about physical activity of the children. This case study supports the theory which shows the reliability of it.

This study can serve as basis for further research, it would be interesting to make comparative researches and see how parents with the kids in so called normal kindergarten think about these matters or whether the kindergarten has any effect on their thinking. Also a good topic for further research could be the play in kindergartens whether it is free or directed and to what extent it should be directed.

The role of the kindergarten is vital in communicating the importance of play and physical activity to the families. How they should do it, is another question and should be studied on its own. This case study leads me to argue that the public discussion about the situation is exaggerated. But on the other hand the topic is so vital that it cannot be made too clear for the families to have enough various physical activities.

This study shows that parents value the physical activity but contradictory to this is the fact that the kindergarten got closed down. This may be due to the financial problems but on the other hand this study could indicate that parents are ready to pay for this kind of activities. How society could create places like this kindergarten with less money is an interesting question which rises from this case. And compared to other important activities, for example multiculturalism, how high we as a society value the physical activities, if we have to choose between them. The ideal situation of course is that all the aspects and activities could be covered at the same place at the same time.

I hope that this final thesis will bring up discussion about the play and physical activities of children from the point of view of parents and educators and that this final the-

sis could serve as a promoter for a more positive look at things than negative research results about the current situation. Things are not everywhere as bad as it looks like. Positive view on things also might encourage families to create healthy behavior and life choices.

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## **The cover letter**

Hei!

21.5.2012

Olen Ammattikorkeakoulu Metropolian sosionomi opiskelija ja teen lopputyökseni tutkimusta päiväkotilasten vanhempien mielipiteistä, jotka koskevat lasten liikkumista ja leikkimistä.

Seuraavan kyselylomakkeen täyttäminen vie n.5-10 minuuttia. Se on täysin anonyymi ja tulokset tai analyysi niistä tulevat olemaan osa lopputyötäni.

**Palautathan kyseisen lomakkeen päiväkodille, vastauksille kuuluvaan laatikkoon,  
viimeistään torstaina 24.5.2012**

Kiitos ajastanne ja vastauksistanne!

Paula Hartikainen

P. 0414354587

## 1. LAPSEN TIEDOT

- |    |           |                    |
|----|-----------|--------------------|
| 1. | Sukupuoli | tyttö / poika      |
| 2. | Ikä       | 2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7- |

1. Suhde lapseen isä / äiti / muu huoltaja

Ympyröi vastauksesi.

1. Käsitykseni mukaan lapseni liikkuu päiväkodissa vähän 1 2 3 4 5  
paljon

2. Lapseni liikkuu kotona  
vähän 1 2 3 4 5 paljon

3. Käsitykseni mukaan lapseni liikkuminen päiväkodissa on yksipuolista 1 2 3 4 5  
monipuolista

4. Lapseni liikkuminen kotona on yksipuolista 1 2 3 4 5  
monipuolista

5. Lapseni pitää liikuntaa mielekkäänä / tylsänä / vaikeana /

6. Lapseni kiinnostus liikuntaan on päiväkodin myötä vähentynyt / pysynyt samana / lisääntynyt

7. Lapseni liikkuu mieluiten ulkona / sisällä

8. Koen liikunnan lapseni kokonaisvaltaisen kehityksen kannalta merkitykselliseksi / turhaksi / \_\_\_\_\_

9. LAPSENI LIIKUNTA UNELMATILANTEESSA

1. Unelmatilanteessa lapseni liikkuisi \_\_\_\_\_ tuntia / viikko.

2. LEIKKI

1. Käsitykseni mukaan lapseni leikkii päiväkodissa vähän 1 2 3 4 5 paljon

2. Lapseni leikkii kotona vähän 1 2 3 4 5 paljon

3. Lapseni leikkii vapaata leikkiä kotona vähän 1 2 3 4 5 paljon

4. Käsitykseni mukaan lapseni leikkii vapaata leikkiä päiväkodissa vähän 1 2 3 4 5 paljon

5. Ohjattua leikkiä kotona on vähän 1 2 3 4 5 paljon

6. Käsitykseni mukaan ohjattua leikkiä päiväkodissa on vähän 1 2 3 4 5 paljon

7. Lapseni pitää leikkimistä mielekkäänä / tylsänä / vaikeana / \_\_\_\_\_

8. Lapseni leikkii kotona useimmiten yksin / toisten lasten kanssa / aikuisen kanssa

9. Lapseni leikkii mieluiten ulkona / sisällä

10. Koen leikin lapseni kokonaisvaltaisen kehityksen kannalta merkitykselliseksi / turhaksi / \_\_\_\_\_

11. LEIKKI UNELMATILANTEESSA

1. Unelma tilanteessa lapseni leikkisi \_\_\_\_\_ tuntia / viikko.

2. ARVIOI LAPSESI NYKYISTÄ LIIKUNTA- JA LEIKKI TOIMINTAA JA SEN MERKITYKSELLISYYTTÄ LAPSELLESI

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3. MILLAISIA LAPSENI LEIKKI JA LIIKUNTA TOIMINTA OLISI UNELMA TILANTEESSA

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4. LISÄKOMMENTTEJA (ESIM. JOS SANOTTAVAA JOHONKIN KYSYMYKSEEN)

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5. Jatka seuraavia lauseita muutamalla adjektiivilla

1. Lapseni leikki on \_\_\_\_\_

2. Lapseni liikkuminen on \_\_\_\_\_

KIITOS VASTAUKSISTASI!